

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL DONALD "BITS" BACON, CHIEF OF STRATEGY AND PLANS, STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS, MULTINATIONAL FORCE-IRAQ SUBJECT: ONGOING OPERATIONS AGAINST TERRORISTS IN DIYALA PROVINCE MODERATOR: CHARLES "JACK" HOLT, CHIEF, NEW MEDIA OPERATIONS, OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE PUBLIC AFFAIRS TIME: 10:00 A.M. EST DATE: WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2007

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MR. HOLT: All right, Colonel Bacon, Chief of Staff, Strategy and Plans, Strategic Communication at MNF-I. Sir, welcome to the Bloggers Roundtable this morning. And yeah, they got some interesting things to speak to today I see.

Do you have an opening statement for us?

COL. BACON: Yes, I do. I got some opening comments. And then we'll go around the table.

Actually the part of Strategic Com I work in is, I actually focus on our operations against al-Qaeda, our operations against special groups. But I also work quite a bit with the Concerned Local citizens, and those are the areas, the portfolio areas, that I carry here.

I'm the one operational guy that's part of STRATCOM that I work with, the ops folks, focusing on what we're doing against the enemy. So that's sort of my niche, just to narrow it down a little bit for you.

Now just for some opening comments. Some of these you may have heard before but I want to just plant broad framework of what we're seeing violence wise, and then talk about some operations in Diyala, put some focus on that.

But up front we're looking at about, right now, a 60 percent reduction, a little more than that, in the amount of terrorist attacks that are being done for now compared to when the surge began in June. So we're looking at a little over a 60 percent reduction.

And looking at some of these total stats, when you look at weekly incidents, we in June were averaging about 1,600 violent or terrorist incidents a week. And as we -- where we stand right now we're a little less than 600.

When you look at EFP attacks, they're down by half. But overall IED attacks are down by about two-thirds. So the EFP attacks haven't gone down quite as far as the other side of road side bombs, but they are down by half.

We're seeing obviously most of this decrease in Anbar, but also we're seeing some very good decreases here in Baghdad -- so south of Baghdad. We do see also a decrease in MND-North area, but not as much as the other areas within Iraq. In fact, General Hurling was on today and said we're seeing about a 40 (percent) to 50 percent reduction in attacks in his area. In fact it's not quite as good as that in the Ninevah Province, but in the other areas, about 40 (percent) to 50 percent.

But that's not as good as what we're seeing at the Anbar as well as Baghdad and south of Baghdad. And right now where we're seeing a lot of al-Qaeda have gone to or gravitated towards as they've been pushed out of Anbar and squeezed here in Baghdad. So we're a lot more of those operations up there, their operations being done in the MND- North area.

So right now we're conducting a lot of operations in -- MND-North with this in mind. As you know, probably know, the overall operation. It's been called Iron Reaper. It's in its closing stages right now. And those operations have focused in the western Diyala province, but also portions of Saladdin and Ninawa. And a part of this Iron Reaper thing has took us -- that has been taking us into Diyala. That's what I want to talk about in a little more detail. In one of our operations last week, from the 8th through the 11th of December, north of Muqtadiyah, and it's an area where al-Qaeda has pockets of activity ongoing, armed forces, coalition forces, had a series of engagements in this area that resulted in 24 al-Qaeda terrorists being killed, and 37 being detained.

And as we were going through this area, just north -- northwest of Muqtadiyah, we found an execution site. And in that -- at that execution site, there were 26 remains found. Their arms were tied behind their back, and most of them were shot in back of the head or in the skull anyway.

We also found a torture facility that had three separate torture rooms in it, and I think you all have access to a video that we provided that shows a close-up of this torture room and some of the photos that were taken. In there, you'll see that there were chains hanging on the ceiling. That's where al-Qaeda would chain people's arms behind them and lift them to the ceiling -- or lift their arms up behind their head.

Also there was a -- you'll see a picture of a metal bed without a mattress. That's where they would lie prisoners, on the bed, shackled to that bed, and then shock them on that metal frame; so a torture technique there.

There were also torture tools. You'll see some pictures of that. I think some still photos were sent to you. The knives that are in the photos, they were blood-caked knives. And also you'll see some whips that they had in there as well, along with the masks that were worn.

And I'll come back to a little bit more about the torture stuff here. But also in this operation we found nine different caches in this area. In that, we found AAA or anti-aircraft guns. We found a sniper gun. We found 65 machine guns, 50 grenades, 98 mines; 170 pipe bombs, we found

homemade explosives and 21 rocket propelled grenades. So some significant cache material too, and if you think about how those could have been used in roadside bombs, those were significant weapons to get off the street.

Just to give you more context now, I've been here since May, and this is the fifth torture house that I'm aware of where I've seen the pictures, or at least know first hand from the pictures anyway about these torture houses. And I think al-Qaeda is synonymous for many with the car bombs, along with the executions they provide. But I think one thing that is not as well known is that their mode of operation is torture in any area that they are in. It's used to intimidate the locals and to try to cow the populace in that area.

And just for other background, we found a torture house in Baqubah last June. It was a dreadful site. Folks were killed by being drilled, or bullet torches were used. And we found a torture site in Khan Banisad in August, one in Arab Jabour in August. We found one in Tarmiya in September. And then this being the fifth one. As some of you all may know, because I know that we have some very good experts on the telephone today, we did find a torture manual back on -- in early May on a computer disk in an al-Qaeda safehouse where they describe torture techniques. It was done in such a way for illiterate folks so they could just see the diagrams and act on it. And we see a lot of those techniques actually being used. It's unfortunate.

So that's the sort of rundown I wanted to give you -- it's just a picture for you all of the nature of the enemy, and what the citizens here have had to contend with. And that's one of the reasons why we're seeing Concerned Local Citizens, members at the local area, village area, standing up against al-Qaeda, because they have been treated in this way, and executions and the murders and so forth. And we're seeing the Sunni population primarily, but of course the Shi'ia have always rebelled against that from al-Qaeda, but now we're seeing the Sunnis doing it, and largely of and in spite of Concerned Local Citizen movement at the local level, and succumb to this behavior.

So it's had a negative reaction -- or it's had a negative effect of what they're looking for.

Now, I could give you -- I want to give you just maybe a brief Concerned Local Citizen update, too, since I worked that part. We right now currently have 71.2 thousand concerned local citizens; 65,500 approximately are on contract; 5.7 thousand are volunteers; about -- a little under 22,000 now want to be in the ISF. And they've very critical force to help hold areas that we have freed from al-Qaeda, like Arab Jabour, Baqubah, where these CLCs are providing the roadblocks, and the security around these villages, and it allows us to move out and pursue other pockets, and they help hold these areas. So it's been fundamental to the decrease in violence that we are seeing.

We can see that al-Qaeda is making this a priority to target. We heard them -- Zawahiri, refer to these folks in his video, and we see the parting of these groups. So it's just a sign of their effectiveness.

I could talk a little bit more for those who are interested what the future plans are, and how the Iraqi government has really made some positive moves concerning Concerned Local Citizens in the last couple weeks.

And with that I'll open up for questions.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, Colonel. Colonel Don Bacon with us this morning for the Bloggers Roundtable.

Christian Lowe, you were first on line, so why don't you get us started this morning.

Q Hi, Colonel Bacon. This is Christian Lowe, with military.com. Thanks for joining us.

COL. BACON: You're welcome.

Q I figured a lot of the folks on this call will ask you more about the torture chamber stuff that you sent along, which is very interesting. But I wanted to, since we've got you, get your comments on a story that came out today in the Washington Post about a survey conducted by MNF-I in Iraq talking -- conducting focus groups with all the sectarian communities up there, which said their top complaint is the U.S. occupation, and that the top roadblock to reconciliation is the U.S. occupation and the invasion of the U.S. into Iraq.

You talk about all this, these terrible deeds that al-Qaeda does, but it seems to me that there's - - since you're in the strategic communications realm, it seems to me that that message is not getting across to the Iraqi people, that the enemy -- that their enemy really is al-Qaeda and not the U.S. occupation there.

How do you -- how do you reconcile those two findings?

COL. BACON: I'll say two things on that. And I would first of all say that's a very good question. And I did read that, certainly before going on here. So I am familiar with the article that you're talking about.

I would say two things. First of all, there has been some positive changes in the polls, in the focus groups that we've seen. But two, I will acknowledge that many Iraqis, you know, do have concerns about our presence here, but yet in the very same polls, they will overwhelmingly say that they're not ready for us to leave because of the security situation.

So you get a little bit of both messages in these pollings and focus groups that, you know, they're nationalists; they're proud Iraqis and they want to be totally sovereign. And I think that that's -- you know, it's understandable. But yet they on the other hand do not -- are not ready for us to leave, and you see that by -- and you see some evidence of that, or some follow-through with that with the government here, because they want us to stay under the U.N. auspices for one more year because they know that they need our help with the security dealing with al-Qaeda and also with the special groups.

So I acknowledge the concerns, but we also, like I say, there is poll after poll will also show that they're not ready for us to leave yet either.

Q But they don't say al-Qaeda is the primary obstacle to reconciliation. I mean, these horrible torture chambers that you find. There are people in their communities being, you know, killed, tortured. How come that's not coming through in these polls?

COL. BACON: I don't know how to answer that, other than I will say that you can see firm actions taken by the Concerned Local Citizens. I will tell you that the fact that these concerned local citizen groups stood up was a direct cause-and-effect with al-Qaeda actions.

Q Okay.

MR. HOLT: Okay, all right. Andrew. Q Colonel, Andrew Lubin from Military Observer. Good to talk to you today, sir.

COL. BACON: Thank you.

Q Sir, to follow up on Christian's question, on Tuesday, the Pentagon released a report that said the government of Iraq's services -- providing services is stagnant to decreasing. It seems that what the troops are doing with the surge -- you know, the Marines in Anbar, especially the guys down south of Baghdad in the belt, and what's happening now in Ninevah and Salahuddin Province, people are doing great. And the GOI is dropping the ball.

How do you turn that around, or can you?

COL. BACON: Andrew, you said that -- the report said that the services have actually decreased?

Q Yes, sir. Let me quote you.

COL. BACON: I've got to tell you, I sit through all the morning briefings, and I do not see evidence of that. We see kind of across the board services improving, not as fast as we'd like, but they -- just like electricity and all the major investments that need to be done, that's going to take awhile for these things to happen. But we see, I would say, other evidence of general improvement; just not as fast as we'd like.

And I'd just give you an example. This week the train now is starting to work between Basra and Baghdad that provides commuter as well as freight capabilities. We're seeing airports starting to open. We're seeing improvements in the electrical output.

I will tell you, it's not as good as we'd like. But I guess I have not seen the evidence of the -- and I sit through every morning briefing where we hear these things, and we see a steady increase.

Q This is the Pentagon quarterly assessment report on progress in Iraq. Again, it was reported on Tuesday.

COL. BACON: Well, I would probably have to look at the exact wording on there. You know, I'm a little more focused on operations against al-Qaeda and the special groups. But I will

tell you that generally the services are improving, and we're starting to see the Iraqi government, in the last couple months particularly, be a lot more aggressive in getting out to the provinces, the provincial leadership and the local leadership, and making the connections of their budget and other ways to provide those services with the locals.

So we're actually seeing -- we're starting to see some positive movement with the reconciliation and the connections between the local, provincial and national levels. Q Okay, great, thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. And Bruce.

Q Yeah, Colonel, Bruce McQuain with qando.net. My question actually has to do with the special groups. You gave us a good rundown on AQI, and I was wondering if you could kind of do the same with how we're doing against the special groups?

COL. BACON: Well, I can give you a little tidbit of news earlier -- earlier than what we're going to put out later today. I will tell you that we are, just big picture, having some success going after the leadership of the special groups right now, and we're going to shortly announce, and I'll announce it here, that we captured the special groups leader for Diyala Province, who is in charge of those special groups in that province.

And as you know that is a mixed province, where the special groups are active, and it's an area where they get support, or have in the past traditionally, from Iranian Quds force. So we will put out a press release later today that we have captured the special groups leader in Diyala. And we've had several leaders in the last few weeks that we have captured at the provincial level, or people who are in charge of the training programs for the entire special groups network here are in our custody right now.

So we are continuing to go after those elements that are not in line with al-Sayed -- Muqtada al-Sadr's pledge for a cease fire, and a freeze in attacks.

There's these elements out there that have not followed that. And we are working those groups who are not honoring that pledge very hard. And we've had quite a bit of success the last couple of weeks.

Q Can you release his name?

COL. BACON: Unfortunately, no. There's -- we will shortly, but we have to process him and do a few things, a few legalities. So getting him processed before we announced his name.

Q Now how much activity per se are you seeing from special groups versus al-Qaeda for instance in Diyala?

COL. BACON: By and large we see a good decrease. A good number of the folks that were affiliated with Muqtada al-Sadr have followed his pledge, and his orders for a freeze. So we're just seeing some rogue elements, we'll call them the criminal elements, that are not following that.

But because -- that's one of the main factors that we have seen a good decrease in our violent trends. One of the factors is, we do attribute that pledge from Sadr. What that has done is it has made al-Qaeda more visible in their actions because they're -- obviously they're not doing a freeze and a pledge. So right now we still consider al-Qaeda as the most significant, or the near-term big threat. Okay?

Q Okay, thanks.

MR. HOLT: All right, and Richard.

Q Hello, this is Richard Lowry from op-four.com.

COL. BACON: Hello.

Q I've noticed in the last several months that the focus in Diyala three or four months ago was on Baqubah, and now you are talking about Muqtadiyah. It looks as if the al-Qaeda in Iraq is retreating to the north and the east. Do you think that they will eventually end up along that finger of land along the Iranian border by al-Sulamiyah (ph) where they started in 2003? COL. BACON: Well, we are seeing evidence of their -- more of their presence on those outskirts, the Hamri Mountains or the Hamri Lake, and that's where we're -- and that's where we're pursuing them, because we don't want them to entrench anywhere. We'd rather pursue them, than go into an area where they are more firmly established.

But you are right, Baqubah by and large, with the CLCs and our units there, internally, it's been stabilized a lot. But there are attacks coming from the outside directed towards Baqubah, but as well as in Muqtadiyah and some of the neighboring villages right there.

But they are more on the outskirts, and that's where we're pursuing them.

MR. HOLT: All right, anyone else? Did anyone else join?

Q Jarred Fishman's on.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Jarred.

Q Hi, Jarred Fishman with the airforcepundit, sir. Could you talk a little bit if you know about the situation in Mosul up in MND- North? I've been seeing a lot of reports that that still has a significant level of violence. And also if you could talk a little bit about the training programs you envision which will bring the Iraqi forces and the IA, the IP, the special forces, up to standard as we start to draw down.

COL. BACON: Actually, I talked about Mosul, the specifics about the training with the ISF and the special forces, I know probably just big picture that we're on that. But we'll first of all go to Mosul.

As mentioned earlier, al-Qaeda is most predominant right now in the northern area, MND North's AOR. Mosul is clearly an area that they want to control, and do not want to let go of, because it connects their smuggling routes, as well as their four terrorist facilitator routings that come in from the northern part of Syria there. And it helps connect them into Baghdad, you know, going through the Tigris River valley.

So it's an area that they are desperately wanting to hold. The Iraqi units there are very good, and the ground folk are very close to their Iron Reaper operation with the three brigades from MND-North 00 or maybe it's four, excuse me.

But bottom line, that is an area where there is most activity with al-Qaeda, or an area that is very heavy with al-Qaeda activity right now. Hearing General Hurling talk about that, I would suggest that you refer to his comments in his press conference today, because I thought he made some very interesting points about the differences between East Mosul and West Mosul, and also the outskirts of Mosul, the various targets. And what East Mosul -- al-Qaeda is going after certain kinds of targets, versus West Mosul it's different, versus the outskirts. And it's an interesting analysis that he lays out in his press conference today.

With the special -- the training of the Iraqi forces, and I know our MNSTC-I Command under General Dubik is working this very hard. And I'm reporting now that I'm hearing from them that there has been vast improvements. We are working very closely with their special forces, with our special forces. And you know that's really the best I can give you personally on that. I would have to refer you to the training command there for more details.

MR. HOLT: All right, and perhaps we can get General Dubik back on. He's been with us a couple of times. But we'll see if we can get him back on later, later probably next month.

And any other follow up questions?

Q Yes, I do, Jack. This is Christian Lowe with military.com. Could -- you say you can't release the name, but since you already broke the story with us, can you give us a little more detail about when this special groups official was captured, what his rank was, who captured him?

COL. BACON: Well, he was -- I'm sorry, go ahead and finish your question. My apologies.

Q No, that's it. Just any of those details up to and even including his name, but you already said you couldn't give us that.

COL. BACON: You know, there's -- and we do that for a reason, so we have policies. It's part of the -- it's broader -- it's international type laws. We've got to make sure that we process him correctly and all of that before we release his name. But he was captured today, so I mean, this is brand new information. And he was an Iraqi, he's an Iraqi citizen, not an Iranian Quds force operative. But he's an Iraqi. So there wasn't a rank associated with it. But he was in charge of the special groups network in the Diyala area, and the fact is, you know, he was a replacement for a guy that is also in our custody.

So it just shows you some of the progress we've had going after these networks.

Q Okay. And who captured him? What was the --

COL. BACON: It was the coalition forces that captured him.

Q So it was special operations?

COL. BACON: I just -- leave it at coalition forces.

Q Okay. Were there Iraqis involved, Iraqi forces involved? COL. BACON: I don't believe so. My recollection on reading the details of that.

Q And have you -- can you release anything about the intel gathered there. I mean did you get like lots of computer -- was this like a big sort of office sort of deal where you had computer hard drives and, you know, documents?

COL. BACON: I'm not aware of that. Of course, even if we had it, we'd be -- we'd probably come out with more details later on that part. I will tell you, though, what we try to do is, hopefully, learn from him, you know, once we get him in custody and get him all processed, learn any details that he's willing to give, so that we can continue working that network and detain others who are involved.

Q Right. Okay, thanks a lot, Colonel Bacon.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

COL. BACON: You bet. You're welcome.

MR. HOLT: All right. Any other follow up questions?

Q Yes, I have one, Colonel. Andrew Lubin again from Military Observer. Down in the south it seems that once AQI is pushed out that Shi'a warlords and criminals come in and take over. What can be done -- because they've done that in Basra from what we read -- what can be done within the belt for things to really turn around.

We want to keep these obviously unwelcome groups out?

COL. BACON: Well, I've not seen evidence of that in the MND Central area. I think that's what you're talking about, in Arab Jabour, and if you go a little farther east of there, you run into some more of the Shi'a areas. You have some mixed areas. Is that what you are referring to?

Q I'm thinking -- I mean, when the British pulled out of Basra, I mean the battles now, you had the problem in Amarah last week, were Shi'a on Shi'a violence really looking to see who is going to be the top political dog in the area. What can we do to keep that from happening in Arab Jabour and the areas where things are going well?

COL. BACON: I will tell you that we looked at Amarah, and I've done some research on this, and talking to the experts, we are not convinced that it was actually Shi'a on Shi'a violence with that car bomb, or the three car bombs.

Q Really?

COL. BACON: We don't have sound evidence of that. In fact, our inclination is otherwise, but we just don't have firm knowledge right now of the perpetrator, but we're not convinced that it was a Shi'a or a JAM or a Badr or -- (inaudible) -- against the other in this case.

And also when you look at Basra, the actual levels of violence have gone down in recent months. So I think it's a mistake to say violence has gone up or -- it's actually improved in the last two or three months there. And, you know, we'll attribute the Iraqi forces primarily for that.

Now down in MND Central, we got the very active concerned local citizens program down there; it's one of the most active areas. And they'll stay active. So -- not just against al-Qaeda, but they'll also be there to help defend against criminal elements, or the rogue militia elements as well.

And we have very active ISF down there, and we still have a full division. And to read beyond that, you know they've got to keep solidifying down there. Q Okay, great. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Okay. Any other final thoughts or questions? Colonel, do you have any final thoughts for us?

COL. BACON: No, other than a Merry Christmas to you all. I know -- it looks like we're less than a week out, and we're definitely starting to see hints of Christmas down here; a lot of Christmas music playing, a lot of nice boxes, a lot of neat things being done in Iraq itself. Some neat stories of soldiers going to schools and giving presents and some Christmas charity being seen in and around the country here.

Q Could I ask a follow-up on that? There were stories about the first -- the Christian church re-opening up. I don't know if it was in Dura, in one of the suburbs of Baghdad --

COL. BACON: It was in Dura.

Q Okay.

COL. BACON: Mm hmm.

Q Do you know anymore information on that?

COL. BACON: Yeah. In fact, whomever is interested in this -- and I hope to report this a little bit to some of the radio interviews I do -- you know, this church -- it was a very old church -- I

wish I could remember the name of it off the top of my head -- but it was attacked in, I believe, 2004. It was a car bomb and it was hoped to be rebuilt. But the violence got so bad in the early part of 2007 that they closed their doors.

And then al Qaeda came down and tore the cross off the church this summer. And -- but with the decreasing violence in Baghdad, as well as in Dura, just this past month, they decided to re-open their doors, and they had their first services. And it was actually a neighborhood thing with the Christians as well as the Muslim neighbors who helped put the cross back on the church. And, in fact, the very first service, they had a lot of the -- the Muslim neighbors attended the services with the Christian congregation.

And since then, I've read about two more churches that have opened their doors that were closed as well.

MR. HOLT: Okay. All right. Thank you very much.

Colonel Bacon -- Colonel Donald Bacon -- chief of staff or -- correction, chief strategy and plans, chief of -- I'll get this out yet -- (chuckles). Colonel Donald Bacon --

COL. BACON: I work at STRATCOM --

MR. HOLT: (Laughs.) Yeah, STRATCOM, okay -- for MNF-I, thank you very much for being with us. And we look forward to hearing from you again, sir.

COL. BACON: You're welcome. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay, thanks.

END.